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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000438

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/12/2016
TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM PINR FAID KPAO MR
SUBJECT: REPORT OF JOURNALIST ARREST ERRONEOUS

REF: A. 05 NOUAKCHOTT 1071

¶B. 05 NOUAKCHOTT 904

¶C. 05 NOUAKCHOTT 440

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Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

(C) Key Points

-- According to recent (and erroneous) media reports, Mauritanian police arrested a Mauritanian journalist earlier this week. The report is not true.

-- We were able to track down the journalist, Abdallah Mimine, a correspondent who reports for Al-Alam, Iran's popular Arabic-language satellite news channel.

-- Mimine told us he was only questioned, not arrested. Police asked him to hand over the videotape of his interview with the head of an organization protesting the continuing detention of more than a dozen Mauritians charged with terrorism (reftels). He refused, and was soon thereafter released.

(C) Comments

-- The media might have gotten this one wrong, but other journalists have been detained here in recent months. Some journalists claim harassment by the police is common.

-- On the whole, there is greater media freedom here than before the coup last August. But Mauritania still has a long way to go before it meets international standards for freedom of speech.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (U) On April 9 the local online Arabic newspaper Al-Akhbar reported the arrest of Abdallah Mimine, a Mauritanian news correspondent who covers West Africa for the Iranian Arabic-language satellite news channel, Al-Alam. Al-Alam is a popular satellite channel here.

¶2. (U) According to the Al-Akhbar report, which was picked up by some international media outlets, Mimine was arrested while interviewing at a local hotel the spokesperson for the Association of Families of Islamist Detainees, Leila Bint Ghaouth.

¶3. (C) Mimine told the Embassy April 12 that he was not arrested, but rather questioned by the police. Mimine said he, Ghaouth, and four of the guards at the hotel were asked to follow the police to a local police station in Mimine's

car. Once arriving, the four guards were immediately released, while Mimine and Ghaouth were questioned by the police about the content of their interview. According to Mimine, he refused the police's request to hand over his videotape of the interview. Both Mimine and Ghaouth were released not long after that. The incident lasted approximately three hours.

¶4. (C) Following the questioning, Mimine said that he called the Minister of Interior, Post and Telecommunications Ould Mohamed Lemine Mohamed Ahmed, who he said he knew personally.

According to Mimine, Ahmed apologized for the police's behavior and promised that he would personally investigate the matter and assured Mimine that it would never happen again.

¶5. (U) According to Mimine, the incident occurred after hotel guards complained to the police that a journalist was conducting an interview on hotel property without hotel permission. "The hotel was nervous about having their building as the backdrop in my interview, and was angry that I had parked my car in their parking lot without permission."

¶6. (C) The incident follows the release last week of the government's report on press reform and liberalization, and a subsequent dinner hosted by Colonel Fal April 7 for more than

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25 journalists to celebrate the report's release and the move towards greater press freedom in Mauritania. However, the report was also criticized April 10 in a gathering of some 50 lesser-known journalists and "Peshmerga" (self-styled journalists) who claimed the report was not marked by "justice or objectivity," and would not lead to greater press freedom.

¶7. (C) Embassy understands that Mimine reportedly brokered a meeting between Fal and the Iranian president during the recent Arab League Summit in Khartoum. Mimine is a former reporter for Mauritanian TV and considered to be an influential journalist here.

¶8. (C) We do not know the content of the report that Mimine was preparing on the jailed Mauritians, but other media outlets have charged that the United States is behind the their continued detention. The 21 Mauritians have been charged with membership and participation in a terrorist group, plotting terrorist attacks both inside and outside of Mauritania, and recruiting terrorists for such attacks (reftel). Their cases are currently pending with the Supreme Court.

LeBaron